DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 025 178 FL 001 053

By- Rosenbaum, Eric
Foreign Languages and the Teenager: A Study in Relevancy.
Pub Date Sep 68
Note- 16p.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.90
Descriptors- Educational Psychology, Intelligence, *Language Instruction, Language Skills, Literature, Modern Languages, Motivation Techniques, Parent Attitudes, Second Language Learning, Sex Differences, Social Maturity, Student Attitudes, *Student Characteristics, *Teacher Role, *Teaching Techniques, *Teenagers

In this paper, language teachers are urged to recognize the importance of adolescent psychology, and suggestions are given on how such knowledge can be used advantageously in reinforcing language learning and in teaching literature and cultural context. Parental attitudes toward education and language study and the reasons behind the choice of languages are also noted. Sex differences, low intelligence, and maturity are related to language achievement. Annotated bibliographical data is included in the footnotes. (DS)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

September, 1968

ED025178

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND THE TEENAGER

A STUDY IN RELEVANCY

Eric Rosenbaum, Philadelphia High School for Girls

ED025178

One of the most intriguing terms currently heard is the expression "relevant." The dictionary defines the adjective without its social and psychological overtones. "Fitting or suiting given requirement; pertinent; applicable; usually with to." If one is a language teacher in junior or senior high school, the last notation immediately leads one to ask: "How relevant is my subject to the contemporary teenager?"

There is hardly any literature which deals in depth with the psychology of the adolescent vis-à-vis foreign language instruction.[1] Books on methodology devote relatively little or no space at all to physical, psychological and social characteristics of those being taught a foreign language.[2] Scant attention is given to such important facets as motivation, attitudes and interests of the teenage learner.[3] Nor is there evidence that the contents of our foreign language textbooks have been selected with the question in mind: How relevant is this material to the thirteen to seventeen year olds of today's society?[4]

FL 001 053

Relevancy can be established only after we have fully understood the mindset and emotions of those we teach. It is one thing to study a language, its literature and its culture in college and graduate school. Gaining an understanding of the feelings, thought and behavior of adolescents, on the other hand, not only takes years of actual exposure and extensive, almost clinical, observation,

but also both sympathy and empathy, faculties inifinitely harder to acquire than knowledge. Teachers who are parents have the unquestionable advantage of experiencing directly the growing-up process and of comparing notes with other parents.[5] Young beginners in the profession usually focus attention, first of all, on what is to be taught, secondly on how it is to be taught, and only last on who is being taught. Unfortunately this ranking in emphasis often leads to boredom, indifference and hostility on the learner's part who rightly feels that he is neither considered as an individual nor understood as a member of his age group. Even experienced teachers tend to ignore basic principles of psychology. They get emotionally involved in situations which should not be taken personally; they antagonize pupils instead of winning them over; they ask for administrative help in dealing with minor infractions which they themselves could have handled with better judgment; and they disregard covert misbehavior which eventually may cause major trouble. Very often these are the same teachers who cling to the traditional textbooks and who favor the grammar-translation method. How important it is, therefore, that the methods instructor be a thoroughly experienced practitioner on the level for which the future language teacher is preparing![6]

That there is a teen subculture can hardly be denied.[7] Like any culture it has its own mores developing from psychological needs during early, middle and late adolescence; these customs and taboos are passed on from one teenage generation to the next.

More shortlived are fads and fashions of coutward appearance such as dress style, mostly fed and spread by the all pervasive medium of television and radio. What is "in" today may be "out" tomorrow. New vocabulary and hit tumes come and go; though highly transient they are learned more quickly than the basic dialogue we are trying so hard to teach.[8]

Great important is attached to details of style and color of clothing. To wear the right garment at the right occasion becomes a paramount issue.[9] Boys as well as girls share this concern for apparel. Over the phone advance arrangements are made for a get-together. "What are you wearing?" Tapering pants, bell bottom pants, certain types of collars, the relative length of skirts, knee-high boots, beads and belts not only take on vital importance but become symbols and status and of social and political ideology. A whole new vocabulary, effervescent and not found in any dictionary has appeared: Weejuns, jeepers, casuals, high boys, culotte shifts, cover-ups, jump suits and tank tops. Women understand this fascination with dress better than men teachers. Certainly here is an excellent chance to introduce a unit on clothing. While relatively few verbs are needed to teach this topic, possessive adjectives, the comparison of adjectives, colors, materials and qualities, and nouns in the singular and plural take on a new relevancy when they are personalized to the members of the class.[10]

To the adolescent, grooming is a prime concern. Youngsters spend hours before the mirror examining every detail of their image. Showering, shaving, making up, the use of lotions and potions, but particularly hair culture, turn into rituals that

den y other family members that use of the bathroom, sometimes lead to bitter feuds, moves into new homes, drastic changes within the urban population and integration of neighborhood and school. At present, some sport side burns, beards and the "bush", while others favor straight hair. A clear relation exists between hair style and Weltanschauung. Battles rage between "old fashioned" parents and early teen girls over make-up. To the former a sinister, immoral meaning may be attached to mascara, green and blue paint; to the latter the practice is simply and innocently doing "what everybody does." Skin complexion and weight are a constant source of worry. Poor children come to school without breakfast because none is provided; those who can afford it skip it because they are dieting. - To maintain that these matters are of little concern to the foreign language teacher would be tantamount to missing the perfect opportunity to deal with extremely relevant realities of daily life. This is the stage to teach reflexive verbs, time and place expressions, vocabulary pertaining to the human body, nutrition, the family and the home.[11]

Within the adolescent population are found not only differences in attitudes, motivation and interests due to varying age levels but also to the existence of divergent cultural patterns. Our pluralistic society proclaims loudly its liberalism yet polarization is no less evident. A new emphasis on one's heritage, language not excluded, is appearing. In this process of image building, youth has been enlisted to carry the banner and does so proudly, often vehemently, sometimes militantly. Newly instituted

courses in Swahili, Modern Hebrew, Italian, Chinese, Polish, Ukrainian and other minority languages bear testimony to the search for self-identification on an individual and collective basis. Teenagers are responding everywhere to the call. Their enthusiasm may be ephemeral, yet we would be remiss in not taking advantage of this resurgence of pride in ancestral tradition. The language teacher of these not so common languages must develop expertise in history, geography, cultural anthropology, folklore, customs and art and music of these peoples.

Teenage friendships, romances and social life cannot be dismissed lightly by any thoughtful teacher, for these absorbing preoccupations influence learning and motivation a great deal more than the adult may suspect. Much study time is wasted on the telephone where lengthy conversations deal with school, human relations, and plans for recreation. Until teenagers finally get their long awaited driver's licence, parents are chauffering them forever to all kinds of social and school functions. Many new and serious problems arise when youngsters begin to drive the family car.[12] Now the young driver has achieved a significant freedom of movement away from parental supervision and to wherever he desires to go. At the same time the automobile serves as a convenient shelter for erotic exploration.

A great deal of social experimentation occurs during this period of life. Some close friendships are formed and continued. Boy-girls relations usually are unstable although there is a strong desire for the security of attachment to one person, to go steady.[13] As a rule, pairs do not yet single off but stay in groups. A mixture of romantic feelings and sensuality is expressed quite openly

for a particular object of adulation. Messages attesting to fondness or dislike are relayed through mutual friends in order to advance or avoid the contact. Principal concern is to be popular with the teen peer group. Sophomoric wittiness rides high at this time of life; sex talk, jokes and vulgarities are treated with a casualness that embarrass not so much the young as the adult. As to membership in the family, one finds a marked rebelliousness towards standards of conduct.[14] One notices emotional outbursts of frustration during the early teens, unconcerned egoism in the middle years, and finally a gradual emancipation from the home which assumes more and more the role of motel-restaurant. In monetary matters, too, greater independence is attained; many boys and girls work at a variety of after-school jobs. Spending money becomes readily available, but time and drudgery are the price. Holding a job can have a twofold effect upon school: work may be preferred and lead to school failure; or the employment may be recognized as a cul-de-sac while school may hold the key to a successful future.[15]

No matter whether or not the pupil has the ability or the inclination to learn a foreign language, certain parents will insist on an academic course so that a college career, better social, financial and marital opportunities, and possibly exemption from military conscription be in store for their child. The choice of language will depend on a number of different factors: Family background or tradition, practical considerations such as present ability or future professional goals, not infrequently the choice of a close friend.[16] French is associated with elegance, a chic

wardrobe, romance, and, to a lesser degree, with cuisine. This language is favored strongly by girls.[17] German is considered difficult but essential for a career in the sciences. It is chosen mainly by boys. Jewish students have ambivalent feelings towards German, either shunning it or relating it to ancestral ties. Spanish, reputed to be least difficult, carries an aura of practicality and attracts Black students who relate to the Spanish-American type. Those interested in art and music show an interest in Italian, though the majority of Italian students is composed of those with ethnic bonds to the language. Russian, after its initial popularity, has now leveled off and attracts students with Slavic family ties, those who are somewhat off-beat, but hardly anyone experiencing difficulty in language learning. The decline of Latin on the high school level in metropolitan areas continues, while suburban schools show a proportionate gain; especially third and fourth year classes dwindle precariously.[18] To be sure, until recently, the study of Latin conferred status to children of the Black community. Now, with the present trend not to assimilate to the White culture, this prestige value of Latin has decreased.

No longer a child and not yet an adult, the adolescent seeks security at home and in school, desires approval of parents and teachers, yet longs to be his own master. However, he is still not ready to cope with situations that he cannot handle and so welcomes secretly the limits that are set by authority. The lure of the street, of the hang-out and of association with a gang may be strong, but in general, well raised youngsters will fear the

consequences of getting into trouble. Contrary to belief, permissiveness at home or in the classroom is not what the typical teenager really wants. As long as he is still halbstark he needs to be protected from the world and from himself.[19] What he does need desperately at this age is to be noticed as an individual. His ego-fascination must be fulfilled at any cost. He will seek attention in class through legitimate means, i.e. by doing well if he is capable, or not infrequently through a display of misconduct.[20]

Psychotic students with low attention span, limited mentality, unstructured behavior and uncontrolled speech can drive teachers to despair and disrupt the entire classroom procedure. Proponents advocating foreign languages for all children may be well meaning but are most likely no longer classroom teachers. There are some pupils whose retention is so weak that even through the conditioning process to the point of saturation no meaningful memorization of words and word groups can take place. The behavioral deviate capable of some learning can possibly be kept in check by utmost strictness. But the pupil who cannot remember is beyond help of the most skillful and well intentioned teacher. It may not be in fashion to make this blunt assertion, but inability to learn may be less a question of teaching than a deficiency in DNA.[21]

Physical and mental traits and maturation patterns differ markedly in the two sexes. Boys at thirteen are smaller and less developed physically than girls. Boys need the physical work-out attained through formal and informal sports' activities. In class they cannot sit still for long periods without squirming. Wise

teachers recognize this physical need and permit seventh and eigth graders to get out of their seats and to act out a language sequence. Although quite clumsy at this age, boys like to use their hands to tinker or construct. They are also great teasers, can be mischievous and enjoy it, have a good sense of humor, and forgive and forget a rebuke rather quickly. Girls are capable of sitting for long periods. Gregariously they like to converse, their talk being mostly predictable: they gossip about clothes, boys, and events rather than ideas. For this reason girls will practice readily with audio-lingual materials and attain greater fluency than boys. Although boys as a group are less verbal than girls, a brilliant boy can be exceedingly fluent and will comprehend abstract concepts more easily than his sister. A bright boy would rather wrestle with a problem than practice structure drills.[22] Girls are docile and will do their assignments much more conscientiously than boys. However, girls have a poor sense of humor, are extremely sensitive to sarcasm and do not forget a slight easily. At home they are charged with greater responsibilities than their brothers, they enjoy arranging parties, and they spend much time in going shopping.

The voice of youth carries much weight in our days. Business listens attentively, Congress is about to lower the voting age, school boards involve their students in policy-making decisions, Mom is going to work so that Son can attend a better college, and Dad is working overtime so that Daughter can take a trip to Europe.[23] Accustomed to be heard, youth seeks to assert its power in the classroom to extend to it fun, relaxation and comfort: "Go ahead and try to teach me, I defy you!" The establishment takes up the

challenge: "I shall make you learn, make you conform. My job as a teacher is to pass on knowledge and skills, even though you fight me. I will apply group dynamics and linguistics, electronic labs and visual aids, team teaching and modular scheduling, Operation This and Title That, every incentive and device I can marshal, just to have you listen and learn." Yet we know that despite all these fancy innovations there must be self-discipline and exertion, concentration and perseverance, and systematic, sustained work habits.

"Dr. R., I'd like to talk to you about my language ..." I know exactly what is coming, and I try every conceivable means of dissuasion: the appeal to the prestige of taking a third year of language, that it will be easier next year now that the fundamentals have been learned, that a well-rounded person should know a language and its literature, that forgetting will set in, and that there will be requirements in college. And finally the authoritative dictum: Nothing will be done without parental consent! In triumph my visitor produces a letter. "... all her other marks have been going down ... working too hard ... next year only four majors ... two years of language is all that is required ... we checked the college catalog ... request to drop her language." I know I have been beaten, I surrender. If I were to raise further objections, I would have to contend with the organization committee, the counselors and the front office. In the end I would be overruled anyway. There are seven more petitioners outside my door.

With all their seeming sophistication adolescents put their trust in the adult and in his word. If the word is written it affords even greater assurance. Surreptitious note-taking in an invented transliterative system is quite common among beginning language students who are yet forbidden to write.[24] Outlines and definite assignments that can be memorized in preparing for tests are favored. Because the teenager's experience is limited he accepts the printed word as gospel truth; he is naive and takes the word at face value. He can understand the plot of Les Misérables, the metrical arrangement of the sonnet, the moral issues in Wilhelm Tell, and the achievements during the siglo de oro. But he has considerable trouble in grasping the elusiveness of de Vigny's and Eichendorff's romanticism, Voltaire's and Heine's irony, the poetic style of Racine, Rilke or Rubén Darío, the language of the symbolists and impressionists, the philosophic concerns of the Generation of '98, and the existential anxieties of Kafka and Camus. In these realms of literary sensibilities the young learner needs an expert teacher to analyze, interpret, exemplify, simplify and relate what is remote to the student's limited experience. To deny such a literary work to a class on the grounds that seventeen year olds cannot yet understand would only be an admission of incompetency on the part of the teacher. With the teacher as the catalyst between reader and writing, the high school senior can profit nearly as much as the college freshman.[25] Fortunately the literary work itself is an aid. Since it is a significant piece of writing, it will contain universal aspects of life facing all men at all times.

Although wrapped up in his own world and lacking the maturity an older reader would have, the adolescent longs to break out of his narcissistic isolation. Because literature is like a mirror reflecting life, young people who can be made to read with perception will soon discover themselves in the writing. The revealing realization that the adolescent state and its problems are neither unique nor incommunicable helps greatly to find the road to adulthood.

Footnotes

1 - The one notable exception is the book by Wilga M. Rivers, The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1964.

2 - The fundamental text by Nelson Brooks, Language and Language Learning, Second Edition, Harcourt Brace & World, New York, 1964, provides some references to FLES but affords no insight into the teaching and behavior of the teenager.

3 - Robert Lado in Language Teaching - A Scientific Approach, McGraw Hill, Inc, New York, 1962, devotes four lines to secondary school pupils specifically (p. 57).

4 - School still remains an important part of their daily existence. The widely used Holt, Rinehart and Winston systems, Ecouter et Parler, Entender y Hablar, and Verstehen und Sprechen emphasize recreation but fail to include school and its related vocabulary as a topic.

5 - Brooks calls them "a notoriously biased group." op. cit., p. 36

6 - Ruth R. Cornfield in Foreign Language Instruction - Dimensions and Horizons, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Meredith Publishing Company, New York, 1966, gives the impression of knowing children and paying attention to their needs.

7 - "... our society has within its midst a set of small teen-age societies, which focus teen-age interests and attitudes on things far removed from adult responsibilities, and which may develop standards that lead away from those goals established by the larger society." Coleman, James S., The Adolescent Society, The Free Press of Glencoe, New York, 1961, p. 9.

8 - "kids ... may not know a stanza of The Star-Spangled Banner, but they rap out several verses of 'To a Smoker, It's a Kent.'" From the cover story of Time magazine, July 12, 1968, p. 55.

9 - In England the Mods wear foppish clothing. The Russians call their style conscious adolescents stilyagi. There is a derogatory meaning attached to the word sometimes freely translated as "juvenile delinquents."

10 - Liberating the objective material from its impersonal setting and applying it to the adolescent and his life is a necessary technique in secondary schools which takes a great deal of thought and preparation. Textbooks provide little help to the teacher.

11 - The reader is referred to my article "The Reflexive Verb Story - An Experience Unit" in Die Unterrichtspraxis, No. 1, 1968, pp. 23-26.

12 - Now is the time to teach and discuss words like essuie-glace, Reifenpanne, arrancar and autorimessa.

13 - Just as there are no cultural equivalents for many foreign expressions, this American concept is untranslatable.

14 - Docile ninth graders will respond to patterning much more readily than tenth graders, who rebel against rote memorization.

15 - This realization accounts for the hundreds of foreign language students who try to make up failures in our summer school review classes.

16 - Although parents may know a language natively, through study or residence abroad, their children sometimes prefer to choose a different language simply to assert their independence.

17 - The attractive film course Je parle français by Encyclopaedia Britannica follows Margot, a young college student, and her uncle on a journey to and through France. But the course does not relate to boys or non-White students.

18 - In Philadelphia efforts are now being made to introduce Latin at the fifth grade level in a number of schools. To this end special courses of study are in preparation.

19 - Halbstarke is the German word for teenagers. The term "half strong" is in itself a value judgment.

20 - Edward M. Stack in The Language Laboratory and Modern Language Teaching, Revised Edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1966, admits the existence of vandalism in the lab (pp. 62-3). But the measures recommended to stop this destruction are unsuitable in high school. Equally erroneous is the statement in the preface: "High school and university programs for the teaching of beginning and intermediate language do not differ appreciably; the introduction of the language is basically the same from the teacher's point of view." (p. v).

21 - "In all probability, many genes contribute to the determination of the hereditary component of intelligence. If genes also are largely responsible for certain types of motivation toward learning, then the situation is still more complicated." Biological Science: An Inquiry into Life, Moore, John A. et al., Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1963, p. 586.

22 - A highly programmed course such as the excellent system La Familia Fernández by Encyclopaedia Britannica, should be

started in the seventh and not the ninth grade, according to its content and psychological appeal.

23 - During the 1968 Easter vacations, 1200 high school children of the Philadelphia area toured Italy. The trip was sponsored by the Philadelphia Classical Society. Hundreds of other youngsters went to Paris and to Germany, under the auspices of the Alliance Française and the National Carl Schurz Association respectively.

24 - The Chilton language courses prohibit writing during the first five units.

25 - This has been substantiated by the success of the Advanced Placement Program and its steady, yearly increase.